

## John Lee Hooker: An appreciation

By Peter Stone Brown

John Lee Hooker's death is tragic not so much for the loss of one of the greatest blues artists, but because there are so few of the original blues masters left. Yes, there will be blues bands across the country and the world playing his songs whether "Boom Boom," "Dimples," "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer" or "Boogie Chillun" for some time to come. Blues societies and other organizations will try to keep the tradition going. Young musicians will listen to his records and try to do what he did, and they may approximate the sound, but they won't be able to touch it.

Hooker lived to be 83 (two months shy of 84), died peacefully at home, and unlike most of his fellow blues artists received recognition, honors, and apparently enough money to have a couple of homes in California and a fleet of expensive cars. The recognition and money came late in his life, but at least he had some time to enjoy it.

Hooker was perhaps the epitome of the blues—solitary, mysterious, deep, dark, spooky and scary. He wasn't a first-time easy listen. You had to work your way into his stuff and let him get to you. Once he got to you there was no letting go. He was the 3 a.m. crying whisper in the night with an empty bottle of whiskey. He was the lone figure on the deserted endless highway with nowhere to go and no one to go to.

Hooker made hundreds of records for hundreds of labels under all kinds of names, and his greatest records weren't the ones he was

famous for. Hooker was best playing alone or maybe with another guitarist, or just a bass and a drummer. But he didn't need anyone else. All he needed was his voice, his guitar and his stomping foot. He could shout when he had to, but he wasn't a blues shouter. He seemed to sing as naturally as he spoke and his voice you could feel both the steamy Mississippi swamps and the cold, hard Detroit streets.

He could get more sounds of one chord than any guitar player on earth, and his big Gibson hollow body electric had a tone that was rawer and nastier than any punk or metal band. In 1977, I had a chance to interview him at the Main Point outside of Philly. I asked him how he got his sound. I'd been playing along with his records and trying to get my guitar to sound like that. I was hoping he would say something like I turn the bass all the way up and the treble all the way down, but he said, "I use different settings. I get that funky sound, that funky settings. It's my style, nobody else got."

After the interview I went back to watch the second set and ran into George Thorogood. I said to Thorogood, "I asked him how he gets that sound." George laughed and said, "He doesn't *know*." And I realized Thorogood was right. He didn't know. He could just *do it*. I think Hooker could've plugged any guitar into any amp and gotten that sound. It was in his fingers. Like Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf, he was a natural force.

I was lucky to see that show because it ended up being the only time I saw him play alone, his crazy guitar licks reaching out like a crawling king snake curling around your spine.

I saw him a few more times after that, but it was never the same. Whatever band he had didn't know how to back him up. They forced him into their groove. Hooker had his own sense of meter and his own sense of time. His blues were never standard 12-bar blues, not even in the lyrics. One line would be long, another short, another somewhere in between. It was almost comical. The band would play the "Boom Boom" riff or one of Hooker's boogie riffs, and he would go up to the mike, and shout "How how how how" or "Boogie Chillun," and the crowds whether in a bar or a festival would go nuts. The people who thought blues was about black hats and Wayfarer shades.

To hear the essence of the John Lee Hooker I'm talking about, check out the album (available on CD) *Don't Turn Me From Your Door*, on Atco: ten classic songs from 1953 (originally issued on Deluxe) and six more for Atlantic recorded by Henry Stone. For one thing, the title track is a brilliant example of how Hooker would take an existing song and turn it something totally his own, which he also did with the ballad "I'm In The Mood For Love," making it "I'm In The Mood." In this case, "Don't Turn Me From Your Door" is kind of a combination of two songs that are close to hymns, "Wayfaring Stranger" and "I Am A Pilgrim." Over a loping, bassy blues riff that you wouldn't want to encounter on the street at night alone, Hooker in the true folk tradition borrows lines from both songs, adds some of his own and ominously mutters, "I'm a stranger and a pilgrim/Traveling through this world alone/Got no place of my own..." and it never lets up, in fact it gets more intense with each line. The blues doesn't get any scarier or more isolated than this. Van Morrison would later take this song and incorporate it into his song "Astral Weeks."

It's one of the sad injustices of the music business that the albums Hooker was honored for were the ones littered with various rock stars

sitting in who may have appreciated Hooker's music but didn't have a clue how to play with him, except for Van Morrison and John Hammond.

When I met Hooker, he was a genuinely nice guy, happy to talk about his music and grateful that people were interested. When I asked him about Dylan opening for him at Gerdes Folk City, he said, "I heard he was gonna make it and I knowed he was gonna make it. I was the first man to put him on stage. And he used to hang around with me every night and every day. I was livin' at the Broadway Somer Hotel right there on 4th Avenue and he would stay right there with me and I had this big suite every night, him and his gal, the one he called Suze, Susan. He would stay right there and we'd have this party every night and we'd play. He was so unusual. He had an unusual voice, and he could write a helluva lyrics."

Hooker also had a sense of humor. In the mid-'80s, he played along with *Spin* Magazine when they asked him about the style of dress of the white blues musicians, saying something along the lines of: they got it right, but none of those guys wear the see-through socks.

Whether Hooker's later records were great or not is beside the point. He enjoyed his role as elder statesman of the blues and he stayed true to himself and knew who he was. As he told me in 1977, "I like playin' the blues and nothin' else. You gotta change with the times. I do a lot of boogie blues, but I like it better just sittin' down and playin' the funky blues. I like 'em both, but I see the young kids and they like to dance so you gotta boogie. I enjoy seein' the kids and they're havin' a lot of fun while we're doing it, but I sit there and play a slow, *slow* blues to get 'em all in a trance and then all of a sudden I hit 'em and they really move.

